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Commoning the gardens by the *Bloc*. Informal gardening practices in the collective housing districts of a post-socialist city

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the persistence of gardening by the *bloc*, an informal urban gardening practice in the green spaces of collective housing districts of post-socialist Bucharest. Although often reduced in public discourse to a leftover of socialist survival strategies, this research reconsiders it as an everyday social interaction that supports communities amid urban transformations. Following Tsing and De Angelis, the article views gardening by the *bloc* as a local form of 'latent commons', reflecting broader socio-political shifts in a post-socialist city. Based on qualitative research, it documents how residents use, adapt and manage green spaces, along with their relations with institutional actors, revealing how they engage these areas under increasingly neoliberal governance. The study argues that the overlap between a market-oriented regulatory project, inherited socialist structures, and collective spatial practices shaped a distinct way of living together. As an emerging form of urban commons, gardening by the *bloc* can maintain a shared practice of communal life against an increasingly individualized society, laying the groundwork for bottom-up regeneration of housing estates across diverse social and political contexts. However, through the lens of gardening, the article also reveals the contradictions inherent to latent commons, drawing attention to their internal tensions and ambiguities.

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, urban gardening has enjoyed growing research interest in the Global South (Smit, Nasr, and Ratta 1996; Hamilton et al. 2014), Western Europe, and the USA (Guitart, Pickering, and Byrne 2012; Taylor and Taylor Lovell 2014), especially regarding urban agriculture practices. It has only recently been of interest in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Since the 2000s, studies on gardening in post-socialist cities have increased significantly (Balázs 2018; Bellows 2004). These studies have predominantly focused on food self-provisioning, particularly within specifically designated areas such as allotment gardens and home gardens (Sovová 2015). More recently, a few studies have highlighted local researchers' growing interest in gardening within the context of (post)-socialist collective housing (Djokić et al. 2018; Galoș and Medeșan 2022; Țântaș 2012).

We aim to investigate gardening by the *bloc*,[1] a form of informal gardening that takes place outside regulated spaces, and emerges instead through the spontaneous appropriation of public space in-between *blocs* of flats. This practice has been studied in the context of southern and southeastern European cities (Domene and Saurí 2007; Zlatkova 2015). By investigating the appropriation of green public space in a large socialist-era collective housing district in Bucharest, we seek to explore the evolution of gardening in post-socialist urban environments as a reflection of broader socio-political transformations. We aim to analyse the mechanisms driving the shift from one function to another of gardening practices, in the context of broader changes in post-socialist urban governance. Building on existing research that considers the multiple functions of gardening or urban agriculture (Daněk et al. 2022), we emphasise the importance of the connections and continuities between food-related practices and recreational activities.

Our article also assesses the role of gardening by the *bloc* practices in fostering the development of commoning practices (Florea 2025). Engaging with the concept of 'latent commons' (De Angelis 2017; Tsing 2021), we examine how urban gardening in collective housing districts can enable less explicit, more discreet forms of commoning that have become, for some dwellers, a way of maintaining collective life against an individualizing society. Consequently, our research poses a fundamental question: what are the necessary conditions under which urban gardening enables commoning processes, despite being under pressure from neoliberal urban policies? To answer this question, we

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build upon three key elements: (1) the socialist legacies that shaped Bucharest's collective housing districts and provided a framework for urban gardening; (2) the post-socialist transformations marked by privatisation, market-oriented governance, and ambivalent policies regarding informal gardening; and (3) how residents navigate these shifting conditions through creative adaptations employed in gardens by their *blocs*.

Our fieldwork reveals the complex nature of urban gardening, which is particularly pronounced in a post-socialist city with a long tradition of informal gardening, such as Bucharest. Echoing McClintock's (2014) analysis of the inherent contradictions in urban agriculture, our findings illustrate that gardening can both empower the inhabitants and be instrumentalized to reproduce neoliberal rationalities of individual responsibility and exclusions (Kapsali 2023) and to support the hegemony of neoliberal conditions and forms of governance (Argüelles, Anguelovski, and Dinnie 2017), depending on the time, place and political forces at play. The ambivalent and changing treatment of these practices therefore highlights the heterogeneous and sometimes incoherent implementation of neoliberal policies across space and scales, which results from the interaction between a market-oriented regulatory project and an institutional landscape inherited from socialism (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010).

The paper is organised as follows. We begin with a brief review of the literature to develop our analytical framework, focusing on the concepts of the commons and contradictions of urban gardening in the neoliberal context. We then outline our methodology, followed by an overview of the study's context. In our analysis, we examine the inherent contradictions of urban gardening in Bucharest, which can be explained by the ambiguous stance of urban authorities, who neither fully prohibit nor unreservedly support these informal practices. Additionally, we aim to distinguish informal gardening not merely as another manifestation of the individualization and privatisation of public resources, but rather as a specific form of latent commoning inherent to collective housing districts with particular attention given to 'the variegated social, material, and urban legacies these initiatives produce' (Kapsali 2023, 2). Thus, through an analysis of gardening, our article reveals the contradictions inherent to the latent commons, highlighting their underlying tensions and ambiguities.

Theoretical background

The commons and the city

Against the backdrop of the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, coupled with the dismantling of the welfare state in Western Europe and the rise of the hegemonic dominance of global neoliberalism, the commons narrative has gained momentum in recent decades. Research and mobilisation on commons have developed along two main lines, somehow irreconcilable (Caffentzis 2004), generally identified as the neo-institutional, represented by Elinor Ostrom's theory of managing economic goods, and the neo-Marxist version of political organising around communities' resistance, mainly articulated by the members of Midnight Notes Collective. The latent commoning processes inquired in this paper, escape this dichotomy, by focusing on the 'becoming-common' (Mendez de Andes Aldama 2024) of the public and domestic space. Referring to the relationship between the community and its shared resources, commons should be regarded as 'an activity' (Linebaugh 2008), emphasising 'commoning' as a verb, rather than as a noun or an adjective (Stavrides 2016). However, when applied to the city, the traditional model of commons falls short, necessitating a 'new commons' paradigm (Holder and Flessas 2008), adapted to the more complex ecosystem of urban actors. Thus, urban commons emerged as an alternative socio-political proposition, envisioning a more democratic, just, and sustainable city.

Yet, urban commons are not merely another exportable universally applicable model, but are also a way of life, situated in diverse 'localities' (Urban Commons Collective 2022). In the post-socialist city, urban commons manifest in relation with the public infrastructure, which was largely developed during state socialism and is now being dismantled. Evidencing Ostrom's 'nestedness' principle (1990, 2015), Iaione and Foster (2017) consider this feature among the conditions for the existence of commons in the city. This broken and threatened public grid requires repair and maintenance, which in turn triggers collaboration and care among some of its users. The need for maintenance activates what De Angelis (2017) calls 'latent commons,' which already exist in society and have the potential to evolve into alternative imaginaries of living that move beyond profit-seeking, enabling the bypass of existing socio-political and economic configurations (Argüelles, Anguelovski, and Dinnie 2017). With a low level of explicit organization, if not completely lacking such self-awareness, while the commoning resource is often partially out of users' control, the post-socialist version of commons may align more closely with Tsing's (2021) dual perspective on latent commons: 'first, while ubiquitous, we rarely notice them, and, second, they are undeveloped. They bubble with unrealized possibilities; they are elusive' (255).

In the post-socialist context, explicit practices of commons are often discouraged by the local administration and mainstream political and cultural narratives, partly due to the perception of collective values being abused during the communist period. This legacy has led to the further depreciation of these

values and their strong association with communism, as their ritual condemnation has become the foundation of the hegemonic anti-communist narrative (Chelcea and Druță 2016). The 'civilisation' discourse, which flourished during post-socialism, excludes commoning practices as 'communist remnants' and promotes market solutions led by the figure of the entrepreneur. Even if the state presence is required, it is envisioned as slim and minimal, with its main role being to serve the market and emulate its practices (idem). The frequent recourse to 'civilisation' narratives by a wide gallery of actors, from professionals, to politicians, media and citizens, illustrates local mechanisms of moral mapping the urban landscape (Pulay 2011). Such civilizing vision entails beautiful, tidy and clean public spaces, distinct from the messy and improvised designs. However, no matter how depreciated, volatile, and temporary, these practices have developed a strong resurgent quality, adapting to new conditions while often carrying an attitude of resistance against top-down control, as identified by Mihăilescu et al. (1994).

Gardening in the (post-)socialist city as urban commons

In CEE, gardening was a crucial element of urban life under socialism. Two primary interpretations are prevalent in the literature to explain its presence in socialist cities. The first views it as a survival strategy (Rose and Tikhomirov 1993). The second interprets it as a means of maintaining cultural heritage (Czegledy 2002), as a form of appropriation within a broader set of strategies aimed at making the urban environment more habitable (Borčić, Cvitanovic, and Lukić 2016), or as a response to the uprooting caused by rapid urbanisation and industrialisation (Sovová and Krylová 2019).

After the fall of communism in CEE countries, urban gardening has been studied as both a means of improving quality of life (Boukharaeva and Marloie 2015, 78) and as a recreational practice. Related to this practice, Smith and Jehlička (2013) propose the expression 'quiet sustainability', defining it as a practice that achieves environmental and social outcomes without explicitly aiming for such goals, while operating outside market relations (idem, p.155). Thus, from this perspective, concepts such as 'sustainability' appear as already embedded in the local context, not necessarily framed solely as 'sustainable development' by the market-driven discourse adopted by CEE countries starting in the 1990s. Likewise, evidencing the socio-ecological values of informal gardening, that comes as a legacy of urban planning and organisation specific to state socialism, can contribute to the growing body of scholarship that challenges the 'failure-centred axiom' (Murawski 2018, 909) traditionally assumed by the academic literature in relation to socialist collective housing planning and living.

Building on these interpretations and practices, gardening by the *bloc* illustrates a local version of commoning practices. In Bucharest, gardening by the *bloc* has a long history spanning decades and different political-economic regimes, which it reflects and incorporates. It thus entails recurring collective-based activities marked by physical and relational proximity to collective housing ensembles, spatial and DIY patterns that spread organically among residential communities, elements of care and resistance to top-down control, informality and adaptability within urban spaces not officially designated for gardening. As Gandy (2022) highlights, urban gardens are not just isolated entities, but also alternative conceptions of 'vernacular ecologies,' (34) part of the city's hybrid ecologies, reflecting both social and natural dynamics shaped by historical, political, and environmental factors.

Methodology

This paper is based on successive field research stages carried out in the collective housing district of Drumul Taberei, Bucharest. The primary methodological pillars were a qualitative approach and participatory methodologies, ensuring a context-sensitive analysis. Place-based semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and mapping have been used as qualitative methods for co-producing knowledge. The methods chosen aimed to investigate less explicit forms of in between green spaces transformation while also facilitating the participatory drive of the research by valuing and supporting the informal practices.

Central to the ethos of the research, the qualitative interviews focused on 'the construction or reconstruction of knowledge' (Mason 2018) together with the district residents. Engaging with gardeners in their gardens, the researchers aimed to become a part of local habits of everyday social interactions and spatialized relationships among neighbours. 45 interviews and several informal interactions were conducted between 2018 and 2022, encompassing a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including gardeners, non-gardening residents, urban planners involved in the district's design, and public administration officials. For a year and a half, we regularly followed the district mayor's personal page to better understand the values and arguments behind his statements on revitalization projects. At the same time, we kept track of media coverage – especially in the press – to see how these campaigns were presented and developed over time.

Mapping played a crucial role, not only by visually representing the data gathered through interviews and observations but also by generating further spatial

knowledge. Seeking 'not only to 'represent' or 'conceive' but to 'enhance experience' (Petrescu 2012, 140), mapping acknowledged the impact of informal gardening and valued its contribution to creating sociality in the neighbourhood.

One of the prompts for qualitative research, OPEN Garage also functioned as a relational device allowing for a participative ethnography. Initiated in the early stages of the research process, a former garage was repurposed to host a space for the nearby community. The garage contributed to anchoring the research in the surrounding area by providing a space connected to other local practices, thus further supporting participative research. From a methodological perspective, it tested the potential of shared cultural goods to support the emergence of commoning practices.

The research project, operating within a participatory approach, adopted a situational approach to ethics, involving active engagement and case-by-case negotiation (Mason 2018). Participants provided appropriate consent (according to Romanian research standards), and sensitive data, such as interview contents, addresses, and gardeners' identities, were anonymized to protect individuals from potential conflicts with neighbours or administrative authorities. Moreover, in the face of threats of eviction, the research adopted an activist stance, evidencing the socio-ecological values of these practices and advocating for their support and protection through popular articles, reports, presentations, tours, and exhibitions (Axinte, Rafanell, and Iancu 2022). From the perspective of transition design (Escobar 2018), it could have been arguably unethical for the research *not* to intervene, at least at the level of public narrative, when such fragile local practices are at risk.

Gardening in the context of Bucharest

City of gardens – from interwar mahala to socialist microraion

Bucharest's urban structure is profoundly influenced by gardening practices. In 1930, 67.5% of the surface of the city centre was occupied by courtyards and private gardens (Mihăilescu 2003). Until the mid-20th century, the city expanded along radial roads into the surrounding plains in an organic patchwork of low-density *mahalas* (or districts) intertwined with gardens, vineyards, orchards, and vacant fields. The predominant residential model featured single-family homes with cultivated gardens and courtyards. Whether productive or aesthetic, utilitarian or social, living 'by the courtyard' became a distinct local practice (Tudora 2009).

A radical shift occurred after the Second World War, when the socialist state initiated a country-wide public housing project that replaced the local model of individual houses with collective housing ensembles. Constructed on the city's outskirts from the 1950s onward, public housing districts resembled veritable new towns in both size and organisation. Drumul Taberei was one such 'satellite-city' erected in the west of the city on what many early dwellers recall as 'an empty field'. The *microraions*, as integrated urban units, marked a radical departure from the traditional living practices associated with family houses and garden plots, featuring socio-cultural infrastructure and shared green spaces, which offered residents opportunities 'to construct a first and essential circle of sociability within the larger, more abstract political collective of the state' (Maxim 2018, 160).

But as dwellers were rushed into their new apartments, not all the public facilities were fully operational. Planting green spaces, arranging playgrounds, or installing public furniture were often left pending. This led to a recurrent practice among the new districts' dwellers to compensate for the gaps in planning and management. Driven to transform citizens into 'productive consumers' (Casper and Rellensmann 2021) but overwhelmed by the task of maintaining such extensive green areas, the socialist state delegated the arrangement and management of some intermediary green areas to the dwellers. However, unlike in other socialist states, gardening plots were not supported by the creation of dedicated organizational structures but relied instead on existing ones (e.g. in factories, local administrations, or tenants' associations).

In Bucharest, gardening activities took place in home gardens or vacant areas. Dwellers occupied 'discreet' spaces such as unbuilt areas belonging to factories that were cultivated by workers, spaces along the city's railway tracks, and vacant spaces in collective housing districts (Axinte 2024; Axinte, Rafanell, and Iancu 2022; Rafanell 2023; Ţântaş 2012). This practice was formally supported by the state, which implicitly accepted the growing food shortages triggered by the economic crisis of the 1980s. The *Supply Law* (1980) assigned the vacant land to institutions or citizens 'for the purpose of growing vegetables, potatoes and other food crops'. This law came after the *Streets Law* (1975) which mentioned that 'the care and arrangement of inner courtyards, of green areas (. . .) is an obligation of every tenant.' Until the 1990s, some of the larger spaces within collective housing districts were transformed into productive plots, while smaller green spaces in between *blocs* were planted with fruit trees or flowers.

Post-socialist gardens – privatized, decaying, evicted, while some (still) surviving

After the fall of state socialism in 1989, food self-provisioning gradually disappeared from the green

spaces within collective housing districts. The decline of agricultural practices reflected broader changes in urban governance and the neoliberalization of urban policies (Rafanell 2024).

The shift from a planned economy to a market-oriented framework dramatically reshaped urban planning in Bucharest, prioritising economic development and investment attractiveness, which in turn spurred significant land speculation in Bucharest and its outskirts (Nae and Turnock 2011). During this era of 'roll back neoliberalism' (Peck and Tickell 2002), the state largely withdrew from its welfare functions, thereby allowing private initiatives to emerge. Consequently, Bucharest experienced an increase in the privatisation of public spaces, particularly green areas (Gavriș and Popescu 2021).

Within the collective housing districts, this phase was notably marked by the proliferation of informal commercial kiosks and the extensive appropriation of green spaces, which sometimes even became privatised extensions of ground-floor apartments (Guțoiu 2023). These transformations fostered the perception of a city 'invaded' by informal practices and plagued by chaotic forms of privatisation (Rufat 2008, 26).

A subsequent phase, starting in the 2000s, saw local authorities undertake highly publicized operations to 'reconquer' public space in large *bloc* districts such as Drumul Taberei. Clean-up operations aimed to enhance the city's image and assert public authority over urban spaces. Since then, regular interventions have served as opportunities to reaffirm the struggle against informal trade and the illegal appropriation of public space, including gardening in green spaces. From observations during the research phases, these operations, constructed on aesthetic replicas of 'Western' corporate references, envisioned a 'civilized' living environment characterized by over-designed, expensive, and unsustainable spaces that excluded user participation, self-management, and vernacular practices.

Over approximately a decade, as in other post-socialist countries, from being supported and publicly valued, urban gardening was progressively portrayed in dominant narratives as 'uncivilized' and a relic of the 'communist past' (Pungas et al. 2022, 126). This shift led to discouragement, prohibition, and eviction of the gardens by some local administrations in Bucharest. Yet, as few studies show (Galoș and Medeșan 2022; Guțoiu 2023), the local institutional response to informal gardening since the end of socialism has been inconsistent, revealing significant contradictions. Depending on place, scale and time, gardening practices have been alternately tolerated, rejected, and encouraged.

Findings and analysis

In what follows, we will examine how shifts in governance and urban transformations have influenced residents' everyday practices, uses and conception of green spaces by the *bloc*. The following sub-chapters will reflect on the fieldwork research, highlighting aspects related to changes (that came on top) of the socialist legacy. Our examination of the discourse and practices of 'civilisation' and their effects on today's governance and gardening practices is followed by an illustration of practices identified in Drumul Taberei, partially during their revival amid the COVID-19 pandemic. These illustrations aim to situate the concept of latent commons within the context of collective housing districts, by evidencing forms of collective living that still survive, and by identifying contradictions of these latent commons.

The socialist legacy of gardening

Partially institutionalized during the state socialism period, gardening became firmly established within the context of collective housing districts. As shown above, beginning in the mid-1970s, the state delegated the work of caring for green spaces between the blocs to the residents. Since the economic crisis of the 1980s, it also encouraged the subdivision and cultivation of unbuilt land within the districts. Managed by local institutions or factories, these plots were intended in principle for workers' self-subsistence, but often also went to those with 'connections,' such as mid-management or technocrats. However, as our interviews indicate, the state's formalization of these practices was sometimes subverted by residents, who used them more for socialization, DIY activities, or leisure, rather than just for economic compensation. A now retired architect who was invited during the 1980s to taste the products of such a garden confessed that 'they were planting a few things there, but it was more for pleasure than purpose'. These moments of gardening, both formal and informal, were still experiences of sharing a collective infrastructure in the proximity of living spaces. This ambivalence – hijacking institutions and official protocols somewhat discreetly, without direct confrontation, while simultaneously keeping them alive through everyday habits and ways of living – is a distinctive legacy that characterizes local urban gardens within this global phenomenon.

However, some residents kept mixed feelings; a few particularly resented the quasi-compulsory nature of these actions organised by tenants' associations, expressed through ironic remarks like, 'If it is mandatory, with pleasure!'. Others, however, recall turning these actions into opportunities for socialization and community bonding, which they genuinely enjoyed. These plots fostered the development of explicit communities of gardener-neighbours. As a resident who grew up among the gardens of the 1980s recalls,

> It was like a small community here, even though we were from different *blocs*. Everyone was sharing. (. . .) All day it was: "Where are you going? To the garden!" It was like a kind of courtyard by the *bloc*, it was our space of freedom, of play, of anything.

These gardens brought together not just people in need of food or those participating in mandatory activities, but also those genuinely passionate about gardening, creating a social space that facilitated interactions and exchanges different from those experienced in the more regulated spaces of the district.

At the same time, their shady distribution and organisation system, along with their sometimes over-territorial caretakers who turned them into exclusivist areas coveted by less fortunate residents or resented by groups with different interests, affected their evolution and contributed to their decline. Despite many historical plots not surviving the post-socialist era, the habit of taking care of the spaces in between the *blocs* and the everyday rituals of relating between some neighbours partially survived and were even passed down to the next generations, who reactivated and adapted them in times of need.

'Civilizing' the green in post-socialist Bucharest

After the collapse of socialism, food self-provisioning gradually declined in collective housing districts. Firstly, land resources diminished due to the restitution of private property, which facilitated real estate developments on agricultural plots within the context of almost unregulated town planning. Cultivated lands were also converted into public facilities or infrastructure previously lacking during the socialist period, such as public parks, shops, and churches. Moreover, some of these residual spaces have been appropriated and privatised by dwellers themselves to accommodate new needs, such as garages, parking lots, or informal constructions.

Secondly, informal gardening has been the target of repeated operations by local authorities since the 2000s, which aimed to 'clean up' and 'civilize' green spaces by razing them to the ground. A Bucharest resident who lived until the 2000s in a collective housing district recalled:

> In the gardens between the *blocs*, some people were planting onions and tomatoes. At some point, the district council took them away and turned them into *civilized* gardens, with trees and play areas.

The narrative of 'civilisation' applied to Bucharest's extensive collective housing districts led to significant landscape transformations: thermal rehabilitations of buildings (Iancu 2011), the installation of 'modern' city equipment, and the ensuring that green spaces conform to a homogeneous appearance – that is, considered to be compliant with the image of a European city.

This concern with improving Bucharest's image and eliminating its presumed socialist heritage resonated among the population. This is particularly evident in the disqualification of subsistence practices, which are associated both with Romania's peasant heritage and with the imagery of the food shortage that marked the last decade of the socialist era. Often conflated, the rural and communist legacies are denigrated and treated as forms of backwardness by many residents, who invoke them to distance themselves from an embarrassing past. One local, now a grandmother and member of a self-organised collective of gardeners, remarks:

> We don't grow vegetables in front of the *bloc*, because then we ruin everything. Those belong in the countryside, in everyone's garden. Here, we just wanted to please the eye when you walk by and enter the *bloc*.

The shift in gardening practices toward recreational uses illustrates how Drumul Taberei residents align with narratives that discredit food self-provisioning. This change highlights how neoliberal ideologies shape individual behaviours and encourage active participation in transformative projects. Moreover, Gago (2017, 6) argues that informal practices, although rooted in solidarity and local knowledge, by utilizing 'community skills of self-management and intimate know-how as a technology of mass self-entrepreneurship' are integrated into a 'neoliberalism from below' logic.

Although the local administration often strongly rejects informal gardening – a view sometimes shared by residents – the interventions to clean up green spaces are only occasional. Due to constrained financial resources, authorities are unable to maintain all the green spaces in their districts. As a result, they are compelled to accept these informal gardening activities. Recently, however, innovative strategies for conceptualizing and managing informal gardening have emerged, encouraging citizen participation. This shift reflects an intention to formalize these latent commoning practices within a framework that enhances their oversight.

Gardens torn between control and participation

Interviews with urban planning departments across several districts in Bucharest reveal a predominant perception among local administrations that views the appropriation of green spaces by citizens negatively, or at best, as a *de facto* state of things. Such appropriations are tolerated as long as public authorities acknowledge their limitations in maintaining hundreds of gardens adjacent to large housing estates, without resulting in excessive privatisation.

Unable to finance the upkeep of all the green spaces in its jurisdiction, the Sector 6[2] administration launched a program in 2021 to encourage residents to take care of the green spaces surrounding their buildings. Unintentionally echoing strategies promoted during the socialist era, the mayor infused the approach with fresh terminology to lend it an innovative dimension. For example, he emphasized his background in the NGO sector as a foundation for his commitment to participation, presenting community involvement as a central objective of his approach.

The program invited homeowners' associations to sign a contract with the district authorities, providing them with tools, seedlings, and plants to maintain the green space adjacent to their buildings. However, local authorities retained control over the aesthetics of these spaces by specifying the types of flowers to be planted and banning DIY furniture, thereby promoting a standardized appearance. Despite these measures, the initiative did not meet its expectations, with the mayor acknowledging its shortcomings during a public debate as 'a failure' (Dispariţiile Oraşului 2023).

The transformation of green spaces involved several initiatives, including interventions by the 'Public Domain Administration', which invited residents to participate in cleaning these spaces. A primary goal was to remove fences, a source of significant tension among gardeners who see them as essential for protecting their gardens. Conversely, the mayor advocates for an 'open city, without fences, without barriers', distancing his spatial policies from the previous administrations that installed them. At the same time, he associates fencing the gardens with the 'nostalgia for the village', thus deeming it a characteristic trait of a countryside mentality.

The ambiguity of the authorities' position stems from their minimal intervention, coupled with actions perceived as aggressive by some local residents. The mayor's attitude during the campaign is significant in this respect. Seizing the opportunity to publicize his initiative with this event, he joined the employees of the Public Domain department in their activities. At the end of the first day of action, he posted on social media: 'I'm disappointed. We were present as always, but you didn't really make your presence felt. Not many people came out to clean their *bloc*'s garden.'

However, such programs seeking to involve residents were soon contradicted by other operations of the city hall, aiming to completely transform the green spaces on the district's main boulevards. There, the gardens were destroyed to make way for rolls of lawns and flower species chosen by the administration, effectively erasing years of personal investment in these gardens. One long-time resident, now retired, expressed: 'Gardens made by people were the most beautiful and original, [what is happening now] is an erasure of identity'.

The continuation of clean-up operations in gardens that are no longer used for productive purposes highlights the local authorities' on-going efforts to regain control over these spaces. Even though residents adhere to new norms set by local authorities and have ceased agricultural activities, spontaneous commoning practices are still discouraged. In fact, the introduction of public participation into district governance aimed at garnering support for the mayor's initiatives. Despite attempts to renew urban management methods, the authorities' approach to urban gardening remains ambiguous and unpredictable, fluctuating between pragmatic acknowledgment of budgetary constraints and a desire to assert control through highly visible actions. This inconsistency has fostered insecurity among gardeners, with many expressing confusion about the authorities' contradictory stances. As a middle-aged woman puts it,

> who knows if they're not going to break everything? We don't want them to take down the fences, because the hedges don't provide enough protection from the dogs. They said they'd come and give us flowers, but we'll see if they really do. We didn't wait for them to plant; we've always done things ourselves, by our own means.

Without negotiation procedures facilitated by the administration, the process ended up dividing and fragmenting the residents even more, antagonizing gardeners and non-gardeners. Administrative top-down interventions prevented the further participation of (some) gardeners, discouraging perhaps the most active group in taking over the care of the in between green spaces from the administration. However, the stubborn, creative and discreet character of commoning developed over time by generations of gardeners has also survived, as some confessed to us that they will resume gardening despite the recent destructions.

From the pandemic garden to social and living space

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic uncovered gardening practices around the *bloc*, bringing them from under a layer of discouragement, ignorance and obsolescence. It worked as a reactivation, revealing the role and the capacity of informal gardening to sustain the quality of life in collective housing districts. Due to limited mobility and restricted social interaction, residents turned to nearby spaces and used them to meet their pressing needs. That moment evidenced how gardening is connected to a wider social context, being sensitive to emotional fluctuations that trigger gardeners' motivation, such as therapeutic, belonging and relational needs.

For some, gardening was an established practice that intensified during the pandemic, but for many others, it was a first. However, most of the beginners we talked to identified the gardens from 'back in the day' as an inspiration. Residents, active gardeners or just passers-by, acknowledge it as a familiar phenomenon, part of the local culture of living.

Several residents began collaborating and offering mutual help, transforming planted gardens into spaces for interaction and exchange. A middle-aged woman, on the verge of retirement and temporarily laid off during the pandemic, recalls how she became part of a self-organised collective of gardeners:

> I didn't start with the idea that someone would help me. I relied only on my husband and in the end I had about two or three women who helped me and about two or three men who also helped with the digging.

Estimating that about 10% of the *bloc's* residents 'participated both materially and with work,' this garden represents one of the few contemporary examples of explicitly self-organised gardens in the studied area. Here, members meet regularly, make decisions, and contribute, while also befriending one another and often spending time together in the garden, creating a social green space.

Gardening belongs to a wider ecosystem of practices that transforms in between spaces of the district according to the various needs of diverse dwellers. Such constant spatial transformations became a widespread and accepted way of life in the district. Paradoxically, the actors' need for individualization generates a multitude of socio-spatial actions that form a community of proximity to which these practitioners belong. Thus, the disobedient and creative spatial practices of gardening by the *bloc* represent situated forms of latent commoning, which reveal the tensions and contradictions of informal practices of collective living.

Discussion and conclusions

Bucharest has a long history of gardens and courtyards. In these spaces domestic life expanded, the relationship with the street was filtered, social life unfolded, and participation in the first circle of community took place. Disobedient and creative, adapting and transforming, the gardens softened the sharp corners of the frequent shifts in housing policies and living conditions. By mobilising attachment to the district, fostering a sense of belonging to a community of proximity, and enacting a spatialized relationship among (some) neighbours, gardening remains a distinct and specific local practice of collective living. At the same time, gardening practices reflect larger social phenomena, such as the turn towards neoliberal urban governance, which thrive in the local context fuelled by a strong anti-communist narrative. Such a process is supported by market forces and public administration alike, through the local authorities' market-oriented regulatory project. For the local administration, the perspective over gardening is contradictory, balancing between laissez-faire pragmatism and top-down interventionism. Gardening is seen both as an obstacle and as a tool, depending on the scale, specific location, and actors involved. The garden topic is used when it suits political communication tactics, in a public relation type of governance. Moreover, even when authorities attempt to stimulate participation and claim to renew governance methods, they do so in a manner that reproduces the same 'civilisation' narrative and practices, reflecting an overall condescending attitude toward informal gardening.

Often, the administration's approach reinforces gardeners' mistrust, prompting a defensive stance that does not fully align with administrative expectations. Nevertheless, the neoliberal ethos manifests among gardeners too, as they adopt civilizing discourses and distance themselves from rural practices deemed incompatible with a modern, urban identity. The dominant narrative born after the 1990s, which privileges autonomy and entrepreneurship, has pushed collective actions into the category of rejected practices, as they are often associated with 'communist leftovers'. Thus, appropriation sometimes turns into privatisation, excessive care becomes exclusion, and collaboration is replaced by conflicts among neighbours. Lacking a negotiated framework, without the state assuming a facilitator position and in the absence of a narrative evidencing their role and impact over the quality of life in the neighbourhood, local informal gardening practices illustrate McClintock's (2014) perspective, remaining rather contradictory.

Nevertheless, we argue that despite inherent contradictions, gardening by the *bloc* is one of the few remaining instances where latent commons articulate into implicit and explicit ways of spatialized relationships which escape both marketization and institutionalization. However, as Tsing (2021) points, latent commons are not a universal solution, as they resist institutionalization and generalization, being inherent to life, rather than to utopian projects. Evidenced by the research, latent commoning often finds such valves within the social fabric and erupts in moments of coagulation, taking various local forms, such as the intensification of gardening in times of pandemic. Forged in specific historical and spatial contexts, gardening by the *bloc* shares with other informal, ephemeral practices hosted by cities outside the Global North a low level of organization, compensated by an acute sense of disobedience against any top-down control. Discreet, resurgent, and creative, gardening as commoning becomes for its practitioners a situated practice of community belonging and a way to manifest

attachment to the district. By resisting impulses of excessive formalization towards public policies or political projects, the researched gardening practices point towards looking more to the conditions in which latency might blossom into discreet forms of commoning. As in the case of Drumul Taberei district, such optimal conditions include the cultivation and the collective transformation of the generous spaces between buildings, completed by sharing and valuing the local memory, while encouraging the everyday habits of relationship building among neighbours.

Our first contribution to the literature is a closer examination of gardening practices that highlight the incomplete and contradictory neoliberal governance policies in the post-socialist context. As the local authorities oscillate between valorisation and depreciation, they tend alternately to make these practices a potential instrument for neoliberal policies (by justifying the withdrawal of the state) or a form of resistance to them. The second contribution of this paper is revealing the link between informal gardening and the possibility of a less visible, explicit or affirmative version of commoning. Creative and disobedient, gardening is becoming a form of belonging and participation in a community through the shared practice of gardening by the *bloc*. Thirdly, the research engages with the commons theories, pointing more towards the conditions when commons might become activated into discreet commoning, as a local version of latent commons. Departing from Ostrom's (1990, 2015) binary economic framing and looking beyond Iaione and Foster (2017) institutionalization of the self-governance of city's resources, the paper explored urban commons' less explicit and latent forms (De Angelis 2017; Tsing 2021). Thus, the paper revealed how, in a neoliberal framework, tensions manifest around these commons, notably through the alignment of certain residents with norms – primarily aesthetic – dictated by local authorities, and through the over-privatisation of gardens.

Finally, the fourth contribution is highlighting the strong connection between urban gardening and the housing context, as a spatial practice of living together, this aspect echoing the 'quiet sustainability' concept (Smith and Jehlička 2013). Nevertheless, their valuable social contributions as situated forms of urban commons should be further investigated in terms of their environmental contributions in the local context. In a Bucharest of exacerbated individualism, radical privatisation, fragmentation and closure of community spaces, and technocratic solutions imposed without negotiation and participation, collective practices around gardening by the *bloc* contribute to the survival of a social infrastructure of proximity.

Overall, informal gardening in Bucharest's post-socialist housing estates evidences how the legacy of socialist infrastructure and everyday vernacular adaptations can help mitigate the internal contradictions and ambiguities of urban commons, by sustaining situated, relational practices that resist both market appropriation and rigid institutionalization.

Notes

1. Translated as 'block', it represents a 'building consisting of individual properties defined as apartments and the undivided common property' (*Monitorul Oficial*, 2009), while in everyday language it can also represent the whole district and also used to define a specific way of living 'by the *bloc*'. Therefore, *bloc* is a specific local expression and it will be used as such throughout the text.
2. One of the six administrative Sectors of Bucharest, that includes the Drumul Taberei district.

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